

Decadent Beginnings, Symbolist Endings

The Decadent movement was an artistic movement of art and literature from the late 1800s. Some place the beginning of the movement with the 1857 publication of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, others as late as Anatole Baju's magazine *Le Décadent*, first published in 1886. Decadent literature was the primary mode of French literature from the beginning of the *belle époque* through about 1900, and the many schools of literature at the time, including Parnassism, Naturalism,¹ Symbolism, and Decadentism proper all fall under its purview. This decadent umbrella is primarily comprised of a group of themes which are themselves constitutive of much of what the Decadent movement represented. They include, in no particular order: Theophile Gautier's Parnassian declaration "*l'art pour l'art*" (art for art's sake), the assertion that there are no deep or primordial truths, the preeminence of artifice over the natural, the modern city as a hive of moral depravity which infects the modern man rendering him weak and effete, reveling in the dissolution of man and society, hereditary vice, diabolism, and fear over the pernicious evil of women's sexuality which is best represented through the *femme fatale* trope.

As John Reed figures in *Decadent Style*, properly decadent fiction is fiction that contains both the above themes as well as a rather unique structure. These novels are constructed in a way that Reed likens to a rosary, most similar to a series of vignettes tied together by the development of themes rather than the natural push of a chronological plot. Literature that contained only the above themes he called literature of decadence. He gives no name for literature with the above structure but without the decadent sensibility to match.

¹ Naturalism is widely considered antithetical to the Decadent movement, and for good reason. The Naturalists took a highly scientific and granular view of society that Huysmans and other Decadents repudiated. However, Naturalism pulls from the same well of imagination as Decadentism, and is largely an opposite approach to the same themes. Take for instance *Germinie Lacerteux* by the brothers Goncourt in which the titular character moves to Paris wherein she becomes initiated into sin and eventually dies of illness brought on by her newfound nymphomania. While the Naturalist and Decadent movements were nominally opposed, they both fall under the umbrella of a decadent sensibility.

The movement's most profoundly influential work is Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*, published in 1884. Various translations as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*, the novel is a masterpiece of decadent style and sensibility. Strongly patterned on the rosary structure, Chapter One is about Des Esseintes, the protagonist, purchasing his new home, and the following chapter sees him designing the lighting of the home. This home is the site of his retreat into aestheticism, the indulgence in the arts based not upon their moral or didactic qualities, but purely on their aesthetic value. Later chapters are occupied entirely by his taste in Latin literature, art, flowers, or perfume, as well as the sickness he contracts from reaching the dizzying heights of aestheticism he attains. His sickness, which he contracts after reaching the pinnacle of aesthetic perfumery, is degenerative and worsens as he engages in more and more aestheticism. Eventually, his neurasthenia progresses so far that he realizes that he will die if he does not abandon his aesthetic pursuits at Fontenay and return to normal life. While the work is structured roughly chronologically, time is not the driving force of the narrative. The development of nearly all the above-named themes—most aptly art's preeminence over nature and *l'art pour l'art*—instead drive the plot.

Art for art's sake is one of the central tenants of Decadentism and also its most perilous. Art for its own sake is art that does not exist for some presupposed idea of Truth in Beauty. It may be beautiful or truthful, but it is precisely not for their sakes that it exists. Rather than trying to mean something,² it is an approach towards *jouissance*³ in art. Like any approach towards *jouissance*, the decadent sensibility of *l'art pour l'art* could not be maintained in the long term; and this fall is prefigured by Des Esseintes' illness and retreat from aestheticism on pain of death.

² This does not mean that *l'art pour l'art* tries, as in the work of some postmodern artists, to mean nothing besides itself.

³ While sometimes simply translated as "enjoyment," *jouissance* is more particularly a level of excitement so strong that it is intolerable.

The emergence of Symbolism represents a retreat from the position that there are no primordial truths to attain, that art exists for its own sake. This is perhaps best represented by Joséphin Péladan's doctrine of *kaloprosopia*, the transformation of one's personality through properly constructed and experienced art. Péladan devoutly believed in initiation into esoteric truths and constructing oneself in the image of such pursuits. To him, this initiation was the great purpose and sole use of art. *The Symbolist Manifesto* by Moréas would agree about these esoteric truths, but at the same time, it eschews the pursuit of logic and reason, it feels that these truths can only be vaguely approached and only through languorous symbols, obscure metaphor, and beautiful vocabulary.

The acknowledgement that these truths are unreachable, coupled with the desire to reach them nevertheless is the movement of fetishistic disavowal.⁴ Truth becomes, to the Symbolists, a fetish object that covers over the lack of deeper meaning in *l'art pour l'art*. In other words, the Symbolists backed away from the Decadent approach towards *jouissance* in favor of the fetish object that is Truth in art. In this way, we can see that Symbolism is best understood through the lens of the Decadent movement and not simply on its own terms. Huysmans' own *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam* is another such retreat from the pulsational drive of *l'art pour l'art*, the rudderless *jouissance* of proper decadence.⁵

A Retrospective on the Virgin of Schiedam

Though not written until 1901, just eleven years after her canonization, Huysmans' decadent hagiography of Saint Lydwine is structured similarly to *À Rebours*. It is composed of a series of subjects in the life of the eponymous saint, and while roughly chronological it is

⁴ The fetish is a concept used by Freud to describe the turning-away of the (male) child in the face of the apparent castration of women. Octave Mannoni, pulling from a patient, paraphrases it thus: "*je sais bien, mais quand-même*," in English "I know very well, but nevertheless." In other words, the fetish is a merely apparent disavowal and subsequent recommitment. Finally, the fetish object is held up as proof of the necessity of this recommitment.

⁵ I expand on this notion in my forthcoming book on Decadence and the work of Marcel Proust.

ordered more around the development of some central themes. For instance, the first chapter sees the socio-cultural and religious landscape that surrounded the life of the Saint. Following chapters see her birth and early life, the beginning of her illnesses, the machinations of her first confessor, the otherworldly journeys she conducted with her angel, her charity, the fires in Schiedam, her death, her memory and successors in the penultimate chapter, and finally the Schiedam of 1901. Rather than proceeding strictly according to the chronological life of the Saint, the book revolves around the development of her main miracle and reason for being: her ability to expiate, or pay bodily reparations for the sins of others, through the worsening of her divine illnesses—a gift Huysmans calls “mystic substitution.”

The book does not, however, exist solely to recall the life of the recently canonized saint. Huysmans instead sees in the story of Lydwine an echo of the situation in France and the world at large at the end of the 19th century. Lydwine’s Europe was beset on all sides by strife; there were clashing bulls from warring popes and antipopes, weak leadership among the royalty and countless squabbles over land by petty lords. Luther’s 95 theses were less than a century in the future at the time of Lydwine’s death and the cracks were already evident. The church was racked from inside and out by the immoral masses, corrupt bishops, and indulgent Popes. Though it was at its weakest, saints such as Catherine of Siena were rising up to combat the ills of the Church. Huysmans draws a direct parallel to his day in the closing chapters of his book. France had recently lost a war against the Germans and another war was visible on the horizon. The royalty of the age had been deposed first in the French Revolution, then repeatedly throughout the 19th century, before finally becoming largely ineffectual and effete in the Third Republic, which itself was rocked by the political scandal in the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the century. The era even had its own mystic substitutes enumerated in Chapter 15 and most clearly defined in the form of stigmatized Anne Catherine Emmerich, who was beatified in 2004. *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam* finally closes with what is clearly meant to be an uplifting note to

Huysmans: just as the saints rose to right the Church at the close of the 14th century, the number of Catholics in the Netherlands, a thoroughly Protestant land, was growing at the end of the 19th century.

Huysmans' book is, therefore, a decadent narrative in structure, but it fails to capture the *oeuvre* of the movement. There is no reveling in the downfall of humanity, no dangerous female sexuality, and the divine truth of the Christian God is starkly apparent on the pages. Huysmans, who had long ago turned his back on the Church, and reveled in diabolism in *À Rebours*, became a devout Catholic in the 1890s. Like the Symbolists, like Des Esseintes, the Decadent position was too much for him to bear, and his life had to end at the foot of a cross or by his own hand.

So why is *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam* important more than a century after its publication? If Huysmans is to be believed, mystic substitution must still be taking place as it has not stopped occurring since well before Lydwine's birth. However, in our modern scientific era, claims of divine illnesses are unlikely to be believed. More to the point is that, to paraphrase Huysmans, "the end of every century looks the same" and the rolling over into this millennium is no different. However, rather than looking for our own mystic substitute, we may want to look to the Decadent movement for guidance. Our world is plagued with strife and hopelessness surrounds. What good can a centuries-old movement possibly do?

The Decadent movement was the birth of modernism, a baptism by fire with heights of *jouissance* that subsequent movements have failed to reach. The thematic preoccupations of the Decadents still penetrate our lives, simply look at the still extant examples of *femmes fatales* and distrust of the urban center; the feeling that men are becoming ineffectual, now often paired with dramatic claims regarding falling birth rates, testosterone levels, or sperm counts. As it is constitutive of early modernism, the Decadent movement shapes the very roots of our discourse

and therefore our imagination.⁶ In this way, studying the literature of decadence gives insight into the history and shape of our art and institutions. Only with this understanding can we begin to tackle our assumptions about the world, about sex and gender, about civilization and art. Without an understanding of Decadent themes, we cannot identify them when they manifest in discourse for good or ill. Nor can we take seriously the idea of *l'art pour l'art* and its repercussions.

Perhaps it is truly impossible to engage in art for art's sake. Perhaps we eventually must believe that there is some great and deep meaning behind it all. Perhaps approaching art for art's sake is completely insupportable long-term. Regardless, even if the ideals of decadence are unreachable, even if they cannot be maintained; by studying the movement and the eventual retreat from their hysteria-inducing heights, we may be able to engage with our own discourses on politics and culture with fresh eyes. Suggesting an all-out assault on the idea of truth may strike some readers as irresponsible in the current post-truth world. Is it not more apt to reinforce shared ideas of truth and reality? Rather than a lack of truth, however, there is an overabundance of competing narratives about what is true. The only way out is through. If we are ever to work our way out of this morass, it will be by reorienting our relationship to what truth means, to how we value and understand what discourse means.

As Lee Edelman argues in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, it is only by reckoning with the meaningless *jouissance* of the sex act, by challenging the idea that sex can or should really mean procreation, that we can change our relationship with sex, politics, and the very idea of the future. I propose a total defenestration of the meaning of "truth," a weighing of the values that commonly accepted ideas of truth carry in discourse, and a reassessment of the etiology of truth. It is time to reexamine our relationship to truth. It is time to question the

⁶ For more on how prior discursive formations shape our own, see Chapter five of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault.

grounds upon which we decide what is true in art and discourse. It is time to dust off the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, to take a stance that there are no primordial truths lying under or outside our reality, to attack the very idea of truth upon which so much discourse rests. Only from this starting point can we restructure the bounds of our discourse. Only from this starting point can we reimagine our art, politics, culture and institutions. Only from this starting point can we hope to create something truly new.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2007.

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